

KAREN MAHONEY

The
Stone Demon



AN IRON WITCH NOVEL

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One

The British Museum was on fire.

Donna gazed in horror at the television screen, which showed the entire museum complex ablaze. Hungry flames licked the night sky, staining it the color of dried blood. Firefighters were beaten back by a wall of heat, smoke billowed in choking black clouds, and sirens split the air like screams of terror.

She shifted on the couch in Miranda's den. It was the homiest room in her mentor's grand old Victorian house, which was serving as a temporary headquarters for the Order of the Crow. Grabbing the TV remote, Donna turned up the sound.

The newscaster's voice shook as she attempted to report from the scene. Or, at least, from as near to the site of the devastation as the news crews were permitted to get. Donna had never seen so many police in one place; blockades were set up on multiple streets, and it was reported that neighboring buildings had been evacuated, with talk of the evacuation zone being moved out to a two-mile radius.

There was chaos on the streets. Panic on the faces of the few people who stopped to be interviewed.

Miranda Backhouse touched Donna's shoulder, making her jump. The alchemist—Donna's new mentor—smiled gently. "Sorry, I thought you heard me."

She sat down on the couch beside her apprentice. The older woman's eyes reflected the burning buildings. Shadows played across her strained face, both

from the television and from the candles that flickered throughout the room.

Donna shivered. “This is messed up. They’re talking about a terrorist attack.”

“Yes,” Miranda said, her tone bleak. “A new 9/11.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

The alchemist shrugged. “Does that fire look like anything man-made to you?”

Donna remembered the Twin Towers. She’d watched the coverage as a child, from her bed in Ironbridge while recovering from one of the many magical operations that had rebuilt her ruined hands and arms.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “I think people can do some pretty terrible things.”

Miranda fixed Donna with her clear blue gaze. “Of course they can. But can they also create flames that fly in the shape of dragons?”

“What?” Donna leaned forward, gazing harder at the ribbons of fire that coiled in the smoke-filled air. She narrowed her eyes, trying to see what Miranda saw.

That curl of smoke, like a tail. Tongues of flame, like giant wings. A column of fire that formed a neck, supporting a burning head with black eyes and nostrils that billowed some sort of noxious gas ...

How had she missed it? Donna looked sharply at her mentor, raising her eyebrows, waiting for an explanation.

Miranda didn’t disappoint. “Before, you could only see what everyone else saw. That’s part of the illusion.”

Hope gripped Donna’s chest. “Illusion? You mean, this isn’t real? There aren’t really people who are hurt ... or dead?”

“No, no, you misunderstand me. This is completely real. The only illusion is in hiding the true nature of the fire.”

Donna squeezed her iron-clad hands into fists, clenching the soft fabric of the gloves she always wore to cover them. “It’s the demons, isn’t it?” She tried not to think of how beautiful the Demon King’s voice had sounded the last time he’d spoken her name. She remembered the cruel turn of his mouth, and realized that in using dragon-shaped flames in his attack, Demian was mocking the alchemists. All the Orders, not just the Order of the Dragon, held the mythical creature sacred. For the alchemists, the dragon was a symbol of transformation.

“Yes, it seems that Demian has made his first move.” Miranda’s reply was so matter-of-fact, it chilled Donna to the bone. “He’s calling us out. Look—the

image is changing.”

Now the flashing flames split off into multiple figures. This time they became smaller, winged creatures, their fiery beaks open as they swooped and soared in a strangely chaotic formation—a murder of crows.

“But why the museum? What the hell does Demian gain by attacking the British Museum, of all places?”

Miranda smiled grimly. “The alchemists have had many artifacts on display there over the years, especially in the Enlightenment Gallery.”

Donna turned back to the TV screen, watching as a wall crumbled and hit the ground in a cloud of dust and flying debris. There was no sound, just shaky camera images filled with a historic landmark’s destruction on a scale that London probably hadn’t seen since the Second World War. The silence made it even creepier.

She swallowed. “I don’t think the Enlightenment Gallery exists any more.”

“No,” Miranda agreed. “I don’t think it does.”



Banished to her room “for her own safety,” Donna tried not to dwell on how this was all her fault. But how could she *not* think about the way that the Wood Queen had tricked her into opening the doorway to Hell? She wanted to call her mom, but knew her mother would be part of the emergency meeting that was taking place upstairs.

The conference between the four alchemical Orders—of the Crow, Dragon, Rose, and Lion—was supposedly to figure out what the Demon King’s next move would be. They were communicating via *Skype*, of all things. Donna would have laughed at that, if she didn’t feel sick every time she thought about the people who’d died in the museum fire. While the news reports said there’d been minimal fatalities because the attack took place after closing, that hadn’t meant the building had been entirely empty; a handful of office workers, night security, and cleaners were still inside. Six human lives had ended. And of course even more people were injured, although those figures hadn’t yet been officially confirmed. Maybe a dozen. Maybe more.

Donna hated that she wasn’t involved in the alchemists’ discussion. Shouldn’t she be part of things? Sure, she knew it wasn’t All About Donna Underwood, but what was she even doing in London if they weren’t going to talk to her when

Demian—whom *she* had released—attacked? It was crazy, although she should hardly be surprised given the super-secretive way the alchemists always acted. She'd just hoped things would be different in London. Even Robert was at the meeting.

Thinking of Robert Lee made Donna remember how lucky they'd both been to escape from the Ironwood last month. They *did* make it out in one piece, but Robert had been barely hanging on to life when the alchemists admitted him to their super-secret, super-private wing of Ironbridge Hospital, back home in Massachusetts. *Her* home, that is. Robert was about as American as tea and scones.

It had taken him more than a week to be considered well enough to travel, but now that he was back in London, his recovery had been faster than ever. Once Donna knew he was out of the woods (so to speak), her relief had been overwhelming. Robert had helped *her* when they'd faced down the demon shadows, after all.

Lying on her bed, Donna wanted to cry, but she found herself unable to squeeze out a single drop of emotion. She was so frustrated it made her jaw ache, and she realized that she'd been grinding her teeth.

This was pathetic. She had to do something.

Deciding to take some sort of action calmed her down, at least enough for her to sit up and swing her feet off the bed. She sat down at her computer and jiggled the mouse, waiting for the screensaver to clear.

If she was responsible for letting all the horrors of mankind out of Pandora's Box, well then ... maybe she could find a way to put them back where they belonged—deep beneath the earth, in their Underworld home. Maybe there was a magical method of locking Demian up again. The alchemists had said it was impossible, now that he was free to roam once more, and that it had taken too much power when they'd done it two hundred years ago. But they didn't know everything. And they didn't have Donna's ability to open doors to other realms, or teleport to anywhere in the world.

Of course, she needed to be able to *control* her new-found powers to be able to use them effectively. And she was learning how, thanks to guidance from Maker back home and intense "training" sessions with Robert. As a new alchemical initiate, Donna had hoped to be casting spells by now or at the very least mixing

a few potions, but she'd spent much of her time in London either reading dusty old books with Miranda or locked in martial arts combat with Robert—which involved sweating a lot and falling over at the end of lessons because she was so exhausted. Robert seemed to be on a Mr. Miyagi-style mission to prove that plain old self-defense techniques were somehow going to help her with the wacked-out “Iron Witch” abilities that everybody seemed so afraid of.

Well then, maybe she could learn more about the demons. There were books on demonology in Miranda's library, although she'd had been forbidden access to the darkest texts.

Donna smiled to herself, remembering the way Miranda had kept her out of the conference earlier. *Fine*. Let them keep her out of the loop. It seemed they still didn't trust her, which wasn't really surprising, considering what she'd done. And of course she'd grown up in the Order of the Dragon, which had been compromised, in the other Orders' eyes, by Simon Gaunt's machinations.

So, perhaps if she could get some insight into the nature of demons, she might be able to figure out a way to stop Demian and his hordes. She needed to look for weaknesses ... or maybe even something that she could use to negotiate with the demons. It wasn't like she didn't have experience making deals with otherworldly creatures, after all.

And if she couldn't put Demian back in his box, maybe she could figure out a way to kill him.

Donna wanted to be surprised by how easily she was even contemplating such extreme possibilities. She should at least be shocked at herself for *wanting* to end another being's life. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't manage to feel guilty. Not when it came to protecting the people she loved. And the Demon King wouldn't blink when it came to destroying human cities filled with millions of people. Among those people were Rachel Underwood, Navin Sharma, and Alexander Grayson—three lives she would do almost anything to protect.

She focused again on the computer screen in front of her. Another news update was the first thing she saw when she refreshed the BBC page. The fire was finally under control, but it was far too late to save the main buildings of the British Museum. Nobody could understand how the fire had spread so quickly and so totally. There were wild speculations about this in various comment threads and on Twitter, including talk of an “apocalypse,” but mostly people

seemed pretty sure it was a terrorist attack. Which, Donna thought, it *is*. Only carried out by a vengeful Demon King rather than religious fundamentalists or political extremists.

According to the reports, there had definitely been some kind of explosion, but nobody could agree on what exactly could have caused it. There would be all the usual investigations, of course, but while various experts were wheeled out to outline their ideas, not a single one of their theories matched. The explosion—if that’s what it had been—was being classified as “mysterious” and “highly unusual.”

Yeah, Donna thought. A *highly unusual* demon attack.

She flipped over to Google, typing in “enlightenment gallery british museum.”

After scrolling past all the news reports about the blast, she came across several sites with information about the gallery Miranda had mentioned. The Enlightenment Gallery was where some of Dr. John Dee’s mystical equipment was displayed. Dr. Dee was the creepy sixteenth-century astrologer, mathematician, and Master Magus who had played a pivotal role—unknown to most academics and historians—in the founding of the current alchemical Orders. One of the collection’s centerpieces was Dee’s famous obsidian scrying mirror. The British Museum also held alchemical grimoires and other manuscripts, all of which would undoubtedly be nothing more than ash by now.

Sighing, Donna decided she’d had enough of staring at a computer screen. It wasn’t like she was learning anything *useful*. She headed down two flights of stairs to the library, hoping that the alchemists’ conference would last a good while longer. It was unusual for her to have some time to herself, and now she was glad of it.

There had to be *some* sort of weapon that could be used against Demian and his kind—she just needed to find out what it was.

Two

Stepping quietly into Miranda's impressive library, Donna surveyed the eclectic décor. In the evenings, the room was dimly lit by iron chandeliers that hung from the high ceilings. Paintings adorned the walls—canvases of all sizes, framed prints of esoteric symbols—and gilt mirrors shone with reflected candlelight. The library was one of the grandest spaces, and yet also one of the most intimate, in the impressive old house.

Although Donna had been in London for almost a month, she still hadn't been shown anything that related to the creation of the Philosopher's Stone—even though this was, supposedly, the main reason she'd been sent to London in the first place. The alchemists needed the Stone before they could set to work recreating the elixir of life, which Donna had (unfortunately yet necessarily) lost. But beyond the dry alchemical reading she'd been assigned, her so-called apprenticeship seemed to consist mostly of polishing ancient equipment and listening to Miranda's stories of "English Alchemy Across the Centuries." Donna was beginning to think that Robert's lessons on how to control her powers were actually more interesting, even if they didn't seem to have anything to do with alchemy.

True, it hadn't been all boring, but she wanted to know when she was actually going to learn the *real* secrets. Robert had quickly disabused her of that notion when he'd told her, "Alchemy is all about the individual's journey to transformation. We each find a different path to the truth."

“But *how* am I supposed to find that?” After having spent two hours cleaning out a closet of esoteric test tubes, Donna was tired of dust and even more tired of being told what to do.

Robert had grinned. “Use your initiative, Initiate Underwood.”

So here she was, using her initiative. Miranda had given her the keys to the library and told her to shelve books whenever she had spare time. Fine. She would shelve books. She would take great care to examine even the ones that she wasn’t supposed to touch.

There was a locked cabinet of antiquarian books against the north wall. Donna knew it wasn’t just secured with an ordinary key; there were magical wards placed on it so that Miranda would know if anyone had disturbed the Order’s most precious volumes. Donna remembered thinking that that was pretty strange, when Robert gave her a tour of the house on her first full day here. Quentin Frost, the Archmaster back home in Ironbridge, had never forbidden her from touching any of the books in the Blue Room, his own personal library. He’d loved to see her enjoy reading when she was a kid; it was something they shared.

Seeing books under lock and key—and protected by magic—gave Donna an uncomfortable feeling. It was as if they were dangerous in some way ... as though, if allowed to go free, they could cause unknowable damage and destruction. Which was a weird thing to think, but nothing was outside the realm of possibility in her experience. Seventeen years on this earth had shown her plenty of danger already, and a whole lot of *weird* to go with it.

Before she could change her mind, Donna tugged off the black velvet glove that covered the ironwork on her right hand. She turned the small bronze key in the cabinet lock and rested her fingers against the mechanism. She had no idea what she was actually doing, but if she could open doorways between dimensions, surely she could open a freaking cabinet.

She examined her knuckles, willing something to happen. *Anything*. The iron tattoos that held her together—and which had bound her power for so long, as she’d recently discovered—were at peace for the moment, still and silent against her pale skin. Sometimes the silver swirls and markings would move, winding around her wrists and hands, up her arms to her elbows. Apart from how strange it was to see, the movement hurt her in a bone-deep sort of ache. Maker once told her it was because some of the iron was lacing together her actual *bones*.

His alchemical magic had been the only thing that had saved her, after the Wood Monster's jaws had almost destroyed her arms and hands.

Thinking about it still made her shudder, even after all these years.

As she hesitated, the key in the lock, Donna saw her tattoos begin to move. She held her breath—the strange sensation made it feel as though the bones themselves were moving, shifting position and reshaping themselves into something new. It was something that she had no real control over. Watching the tattoos twist and writhe, sort of like soundwaves around the small amount of pale flesh still visible, made her feel nauseated.

She watched in fascination as the shimmering iron across her fingers curled around her hands and seemed to flick toward the lock. Then there was a sharp *click* and a sudden release of pressure inside her chest, like a balloon had just burst. The cabinet door jumped open.

Donna's ears popped and the tattoos stopped moving.

She'd done it! She'd actually managed to break Miranda's protective wards. Donna was pretty sure she'd also alerted her mentor to what she was up to. *Well, it's not like Miranda doesn't have more important things to think about right now*, she thought as she carefully opened the door wider to examine the contents of the shelves.

She lifted down one of the heavy volumes. It was bound in cracked leather and the pages were yellow and musty. Flipping through, she was surprised to see that it was hand-lettered in a barely legible script. The ink was a rusty brown, and some of the pages were filled with columns of numbers and unfamiliar equations.

Turning another page, her attention was immediately drawn to a sinister line drawing of some kind of small creature. It was twisted and knobbly, a bit like a wood elf but even more alien. She'd never seen anything like it before, and she traced the word underneath the illustration with her finger.

"Homunculi," she read aloud. She'd heard that term before, but this was the first time she'd seen an illustration. *"Artificial life forms, based on human physiology, created with the aid of the Philosopher's Stone."*

Donna shivered. Whoever the artist was, he or she hadn't seemed to believe that *homunculi* were all *that* closely based on human physiology. The creature was weird and lumpy, and about as far from a person as it was possible to get

while still having a head, a torso, two arms, and two legs. Yet Donna wasn't surprised that the Philosopher's Stone was needed to make these beings, just as the stone was necessary in the creation of the elixir of life. She hoped she'd learn more about the Philosopher's Stone soon.

The book was arranged alphabetically, and she turned to the B section to look for "British Museum." There was no entry for it, so she tried "Dee." She found two pages of cramped, spidery text devoted to Dr. John Dee. Scanning the information, she came to a section that made her pause:

Dee's Mirror:

A polished piece of volcanic glass (obsidian), used by Dr. John Dee to contact spirits and gain knowledge of Other Worlds.

That sounded familiar ... she bit her lip and thought for a moment. Oh, right. John Dee's scrying mirror was one of the alchemical artifacts stored in the British Museum. Did that mean it was gone now, thanks to the fire? She flipped through some more pages before putting the volume aside. It was full of alchemical terms and definitions, and perhaps it would be useful later in her studies, but for now she wanted demon intel.

There was a smaller book, at the end of the top shelf, that drew her attention. It had one of those stupid locks holding it shut, like on her very first diary, which you knew was never going to keep anybody out. Not if they really wanted to read it.

This lock had long since worn away and was hanging by a few cotton threads and a thin strip of leather. She fiddled with the rotting metal until she could open the book without tearing the binding.

A handwritten title page declared, *Encyclopaedia Demonica*. She raised her eyebrows. Interesting title.

She looked for "Shadows," but there was no entry with that heading. Then she tried "Skriker," just out of curiosity. Of course, that wasn't in the book either. The Skriker was a fey creature, not a demon. But a couple pages further on, she found an entry that caught her eye:

"*Strix,*" she read. "*About the size of an adolescent human, these demonic birds are hunters, just like their counterparts in the animal kingdom. Often seen in folklore as a bad omen, particularly known to foretell death. In Roman*

mythology they were believed to nest in desolate area, abandoned buildings, and ruins such as castles. In the demon world, they are known to feed on human flesh.”

Donna shivered and sat down on the floor, pulling the book into her lap and making herself comfortable.

Time slipped away as she read, flipping through various sections with foreboding subheadings and growing increasingly absorbed. No wonder Miranda kept these books locked away. There was some creepy stuff in them. Creepy and fascinating, in a car-crash kind of way. But useful? She wasn't so sure about that.

Until she came to something marked “Demon Locales.” That sounded like it had some possibilities. Donna rubbed her aching back and shifted position, her eyes scanning pages more quickly. She half-expected Miranda to come bursting in at any moment, eyes filled with reproach for what she would see as her apprentice's blatant disregard for authority.

“The Otherworld holds an unknown and potentially infinite number of different realms,” she read. “Commonly referred to as the Underworld in many world mythologies, the Land of the Dead is said to be the domain of the Demon King.”

This is it! Donna thought, only just managing to hold back her cry of excitement. It had to be what she was looking for. Well, she didn't really know what exactly she was looking for—but perhaps she would find something useful here. Something that she could file away and use against Demian when the time came. The alchemists needed weapons, and one of the best weapons was knowledge. Quentin had taught her that. She hastily returned to the page, scanning parts that looked particularly interesting:

The Grove of Thorns:

Recognizable by its protective wall of black roses, the Grove of Thorns is believed to be the one part of the Underworld that even demons may not enter. Alchemical scholars cannot agree on what is hidden at its heart, but some ancient texts display crude drawings of a pear tree. The fruit of this tree is believed to be silver in color, and the tree itself has many names, the most commonly found being—

Crack!

Something sharp tapped at one of the high windows, almost making Donna's heart burst through her chest. She dropped the book with a clatter as her mind flashed to a not-particularly-comforting image of demon-owls carrying babies in their beaks. Springing to her feet, she half-expected a reaper storm of demon shadows to smash through the glass and fly into the room.

All she could see, however, was a single crow. Or a raven? It stared in at her with coal-black eyes that glittered with disturbing intelligence.

Tap-tap-tap!

Donna jumped again, annoyed with herself for being so nervous about a stupid bird. She pushed aside disturbing thoughts of Edgar Allan Poe and climbed onto the carved wooden bench beneath the window. Her nose was just about level with the bottom of the glass, and she got a close-up view of the creature's scaly talons as it gripped the ledge outside. *What was a crow doing out at night?*

Attached to the bird's ankle was a rolled-up piece of paper or parchment, like a scroll. But the paper was black instead of ivory, or cream, or whatever color those things were supposed to be. Donna wondered if she'd fallen asleep over Miranda's dusty old books. Was this one of those disturbingly vivid dreams she sometimes found herself having? Maybe the crow was a messenger from her subconscious. Or maybe she was just hallucinating.

The "hallucination" squawked loudly and almost seemed to glare at her through the lightly frosted glass.

"You're not dreaming, Underwood," Donna told herself. "You're just going crazy."

And now I'm talking to myself.

She rolled her eyes. Definitely crazy. Not that she'd admit it to Nav when she told him about this.

Telling herself to get a grip, she opened the window and tentatively removed the paper on the crow's leg from its bindings. Her hand accidentally brushed warm feathers. The moment the scroll was in her hand, the bird blinked once and then flew back up into the indigo sky.

Donna watched its inky wings blot out a section of stars for a moment, and then it was gone.

She unrolled the ebony parchment, but froze when footsteps sounded outside the library. *Great.* Either the meeting was already over, or Miranda was about to

kick her ass for breaking into her secret book stash.

The scroll contained a simple but elegant invitation, and Donna quickly read it before her mentor entered the room. She could practically *feel* her face drain of color as she wordlessly handed the paper to Miranda. At least now, she was less likely to get into trouble for touching those forbidden texts.

It seemed that the crow-messenger had brought something far more important for the alchemists to worry about.

INVITATION

To: Donna Underwood, member of the Order
of the Dragon, care of the Order of the Crow
(London, United Kingdom—Human Realm)

His Highness Demian, King of the Demon Realm

invites you to a

Masquerade Ball

at

Pandemonium Crypt

(Beneath St Martin-in-the-Fields Church)

Time: Midnight. Tomorrow.

Dress: Formal. Masks must be worn.

Three

I'm not going," Donna said, standing tall in the center of the library and glaring at Miranda as though it were *her* fault.

The heavy black paper in her mentor's hand looked like a shadow that didn't belong, almost appearing to mock her as the silver lettering shimmered in the candlelight.

Miranda placed the invitation on the nearby long wooden table. She blinked at Donna's outburst, but that was her only outward reaction. "This isn't the only communication that was delivered tonight. Other alchemists have already received their own invitations."

Donna raised her eyebrows. Waiting.

Miranda closed the book that Donna had dropped and slid it back into its rightful place on the shelf.

"Nobody said you have to attend," Miranda said in her typically mild tone.

"Good."

"You might want to *consider* it, though."

Donna snorted, for once not caring about being unladylike in front of Miranda. "Why am I not surprised?"

Her mentor shook her head, as though disappointed. "I'm just thinking about what's best for everybody."

"What about what's best for *me*?"

"I believe," Miranda said dryly, "that I was including you when I said 'everybody.'"

Donna dug the toe of her sneaker into the floor, wishing she could gouge a big-enough hole to escape through. “How could attending this thing possibly be good for me?”

“Because the Demon King seems to have taken rather a shine to you, and if he wants you to attend his masquerade, there must be a reason. We want to know what that reason is.”

Donna picked up the invitation again. “But this ... why would Demian’s party have anything to do with me? And why is he even holding a masquerade ball? It seems kind of trivial for someone who supposedly has revenge on his mind.”

“The intelligence we’ve gathered indicates that the demons are maneuvering for something specific—why do you think they haven’t attacked the alchemists directly yet?”

Donna stared at Miranda for a beat. “Um ... what do you call burning down the British Museum? I’d call that a direct attack.”

“On humanity, yes. Not on the alchemists themselves.”

“But there are alchemical artifacts in the museum. Maybe they were going after those.”

Miranda waved her hand, irritation passing briefly across her face. “Either way, we have reason to believe there’s a lot more going on here. We just don’t know exactly what that might be. Not yet, anyway.”

“The demons are probably still gathering their forces,” Donna said. “That’s got to take a while, after being trapped for two centuries.”

Miranda frowned. “The demons are powerful—*Demian* is powerful—you really think he wouldn’t have everything settled by now? No. Whatever it is they want, there’s more to it than war. More even than simple revenge.”

Simple? Donna didn’t think there was anything “simple” about revenge, but she chose not to argue the point.

She forced out a breath. “Right. And you want me to find out what he’s really up to?”

“If you can, yes.”

“I’ll just dance with him at some stupid ball, ask him all about his demonic plans, and he’ll tell me ... just like that. That’s what you think?” Donna shook her head. “Somehow I don’t think it’s going to work.”

Miranda shrugged. “It’s worth a try. You may have more influence with him than you want to believe.”

“Why? Because he’s taken a *shine* to me?”

“Perhaps,” her mentor replied.

“You’re telling me that the Order of the Crow is willingly sending me to hang out with a demon king? You’re quite happy to use me as bait?” Not that Donna was surprised, she just wanted to make sure she knew exactly where she stood.

Miranda tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. A vaguely guilty expression crossed her face. “There will be other alchemists present, keeping watch over you. We’re treating it as a diplomatic event—possibly even an opportunity to divert a war. At the very least, we can gather important information.”

Robert chose that moment to enter the library, catching the tail end of their conversation. “Miranda’s right,” he said. “All of the alchemists received a similar messenger.”

He looked more well-groomed tonight than usual, although for Robert that wasn’t saying much considering his general Goth appearance. He was tall and willowy, his half-Chinese heritage evident in his dark eyes and glossy black hair, which tonight was tied back into a partial ponytail—all the better to show off his cobalt-blue highlights. He actually looked like he might have been out for the evening before getting called to the meeting upstairs, and Donna remembered that it had been his night off. Maybe Robert had had a date with a cute guy—he totally deserved some fun, given how close to death he’d come just weeks ago.

Donna immediately latched onto a hope she hadn’t dared to believe might come true this soon. “Quentin and my mom—will they be at this ball?”

“Well, the Order of the Dragon has been invited to send representatives,” Robert replied. “As have the other Orders.”

“How are they going to get here in time for tomorrow night?” Donna had visions of them using her wildly untested abilities to somehow transport people, and her stomach tightened.

Miranda smiled grimly. “Demian says that arrangements for that will be made. I don’t doubt that our colleagues will be there.”

Donna scowled at the invitation. “Part of me doesn’t want to go, but the other part ... well, *she* wants to kick Demian’s ass.”

Robert flashed her a quick grin. “He’d probably enjoy that.”

“What are you talking about?” Donna snapped, annoyed at the flush of warmth in her cheeks.

He ignored her, then turned to Miranda. “Don’t you think you should get some rest? It’s already gone midnight and there will be a lot of work to do tomorrow.”

Miranda checked her watch. “There’s no time for me to sleep yet. I have to start getting things organized. Not the least of which is finding a ball gown for you, Donna.”

Donna blanched. “A ball gown?”

“Yes. Never fear, it’s all under control.” Miranda turned on her heel.

Donna watched the petite woman stride from the room before turning on the tall alchemist standing in front of her. A slow smile was spreading across Robert’s face. Despite how irritating he could be, Donna couldn’t help liking him.

“So, what did you mean?” she asked, knowing she’d probably regret asking. “About Demian enjoying it if I kicked his ass?”

Robert rolled his eyes. “Isn’t it obvious? He fancies you.”

Fancies? “Who even says that?”

“Doesn’t change the fact.”

“It’s not a fact. It’s your theory. A very bad one.”

“Well, it’s a theory that Miranda clearly shares. I didn’t hear you arguing with *her* about it when she said something about how the Demon King has taken a shine to you.”

Donna crossed her arms. “That’s because she’s currently my boss. Sort of. And Miranda’s choice of words was far less annoying.”

“I realize how *annoying* it must be that I’m right all the time, but I told you as much when you first opened the Gate to Hell,” Robert replied. “The look in Demian’s eyes when he spoke to you was pretty weird. Creepy, even. Like you were a commodity rather than a person.”

Donna knew something about that look, but not from Robert’s description of the demon. She remembered what her mother had written in her journal—about Simon Gaunt’s expression when he noticed the young Donna’s growing power. She shivered.

“We’re not just talking about some guy here, Robert. He’s a demon. The *Demon King*. Do you honestly think that’s what this is about?” Donna picked up the invitation and tossed it at him.

He ducked as the heavy paper fluttered to the ground like a dead, black thing. “Ah, so serious.” Seeing that she really was mad at him, Robert sobered. “Sorry, Donna. I was just kidding. Trying to take the edge off all this bloody tension.”

Her shoulders were still tight with anger. Or perhaps with fear. “Well, then, you’re doing a shitty job of it.”

He ran his tongue over the silver lip ring that caught the candlelight, a nervous habit. “Right. I got that. Once again, my apologies.”

Donna forced herself to relax. “Demian only cares about power. If he *fancies* anything, that’s what this is all about.”

“He wants something from you,” Robert said. “That’s certainly true.”

“Yeah,” she snapped. “Maybe he does, but it sure as hell isn’t a date.”



Donna stomped out of the library and ran upstairs to her bedroom. She wanted privacy for the phone call she was about to make.

When her mother picked up on the second ring, Donna’s face broke into a grin of pure relief.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Donna.” The smile was evident in her mother’s voice, although Donna could also detect a note of strain. “It’s good to hear from you.”

The strange bird with its invitation from Demian was the first thing on Donna’s mind, but she tried to wait. At least for a moment. “I miss you.”

“You didn’t call just to catch up.” Rachel Underwood’s tone was suddenly all business. “This is about that so-called ball the *Demon King* has dreamed up. Any excuse to get us all in one place, I’m sure.”

“So, everybody got invitations?”

“Yes. The Order of the Rose in Prague—they aren’t too happy about it, let me tell you! It takes something special to dig them out of that mausoleum they call a home. Even an alchemist from the Order of the Lion was found by Demian’s messengers. We don’t know how he managed it, but I would imagine that a demon has his ways.”

The Order of the Lion was the most clandestine branch of alchemy; the members were more like spies or super-secret agents. Half the time, nobody was even sure where their latest base of operations was—whether or not they were on covert missions or just sitting around somewhere sipping martinis (shaken, not stirred). Locating one of their members out in the middle of nowhere and deep undercover—to personally deliver an invitation to something as ordinary as a party—was pretty impressive. Demian clearly hadn't had any trouble finding them, which was just another demonstration of his effortless power.

“At least we'll find out what he wants—he may be about to offer terms,” Rachel added.

Donna immediately felt shards of ice smash any pleasure she felt at speaking with her mom. “Terms? Maybe he's just feeling destructive. The British Museum is pretty much gone.”

“It's terrible, of course, but this is exactly the kind of behavior we expect from a creature like that. Why do you think the alchemists worked so hard to lock him away for two centuries?”

Which made Donna feel guilty all over again for letting such a potentially powerful being loose on the world. She guessed it was a feeling that wasn't going to disappear any time soon.

“So, Mom, how are you feeling?” If the change of subject was unsubtle, her mother didn't call her on it.

“Better. Much better.”

“Are you sure?” Donna couldn't help her constant anxiety about her mom's illness and recovery. She wished she could have stayed with her in Ironbridge, just to keep an eye on her, but here she was stuck in England serving out her “sentence” for all the mistakes she'd made. It didn't help any that her mom had a tendency to brush her sickness aside as though it had been a minor thing, rather than a ten-year trip around the bend to Crazy. Half the time, Donna wondered whether her mother's recovery was yet another of the Wood Queen's tricks, but so far things seemed to be moving in the right direction.

“You worry too much,” Rachel said. “I'm feeling almost back to my old self. I've been spending a lot of time with Quentin.”

“That's great,” Donna replied. “I bet he's happy to see you back.”

Her mother laughed. “He's the only one.”

Donna couldn't help her own snort of laughter. Aunt Paige and Simon Gaunt had been shocked to witness Rachel's magical recovery. They'd tried to look and sound pleased, but neither of them did a very good job of it. Even Aunt Paige, who was experienced at putting a positive spin on things in her day job working for Ironbridge's mayor, had looked shell-shocked.

Her mother sighed, filling the silence between them. "I'm just sorry you're having to deal with any of this. You've already had a decade of secrets and lies to come to terms with. Now this."

Donna's fingers tightened on the phone. "I'm not even sure I *have* come to terms with it."

"So you don't want to try?"

"Not really, no." She lowered her voice. "I want to leave, Mom. You know that, right?"

"I do," her mother replied steadily. "I'm not surprised, and I certainly don't blame you."

"I'm just trying to figure out the best way to ... "

"Make your escape?" There was the hint of a smile in Rachel's voice.

"Something like that." Donna blew out a breath, relieved to be having this conversation, while at the same time regretting that it was happening while her mother was so far away. "I'm sorry. Are you mad?"

"Why should I be? I love you, no matter what. I never wanted this life for you."

It was far too late for that, Donna thought. This was the life she had, and the only thing left was to make the best of it. At least until she turned eighteen this summer. *Not long*, she thought. *Not too long to wait*.

She wondered if she would even *reach* her birthday before the world ended at the hands of a reaper storm of demons. She'd probably die a virgin, knowing her luck; she smiled faintly as she remembered how close she'd come to sleeping with Xan, that night she'd teleported to his house.

Not like she could think about romance when there was a demon king knocking at the door. Pushing images of Alexander Grayson from her mind, Donna pressed the phone against her ear and focused on her mother's gentle voice again as she recounted what had happened at the alchemists' meeting.

Anything to ground her, to take away the feeling of despair that suddenly hit her in the gut and made her dizzy.

Not many people her age had to worry about stuff like a demonic apocalypse, but it didn't make Donna feel in any way special. She was tired. She felt old and worn out and cynical. She wanted the chance to be a kid again, before it was too late. She dreamed of traveling the world and going to college and doing normal teenage things. Perhaps those things would always remain just out of reach—more like a cruel mirage than a dream—but if she didn't hold on to hope, what else was there?



Donna paced up and down the street, just outside the little row of Victorian houses in the heart of Pimlico. The lights of the city still burned, even at this time of night, and the sky was full of stars. Miranda hadn't wanted her to go out alone, but Donna needed air before she could even think of going to bed. She'd promised to stay within sight of the house, but even this tiny slice of liberation lifted her spirits. She'd declined Robert's offer to join her for an "early hours" walk around the neighborhood—she was still pissed at him for talking about Demian the way that he had. Sure, he meant well, but that didn't mean he knew what he was talking about.

Power was the only currency that someone like the Demon King cared about. As Miranda had already indicated, it wasn't about something as ... *banal* as destruction; there was more to it than that. It wasn't even about revenge. Donna had felt it that night in the Ironwood, when Demian had first stepped free of his prison—and then once again, that day on the bridge when he'd given her the first of many black roses.

She shivered, remembering once again his gaze and the way he'd spoken to her. As that thought crossed her mind, she saw a pale shape coalesce out of nothing but cool night air.

He stood waiting for her, three doors down from Miranda's house.

She instantly recognized the tall, slender figure, who was motionless except for his silver hair, which was blowing slightly in the sudden wind. It felt like something out of a movie, and Donna had no doubt that this was the effect Demian was going for.

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